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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MEXICO 000486

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM SNAR KCRM MX

SUBJECT: VIOLENCE ESCALATES, CARTELS TAKE A STAND AGAINST
GOM

REF: A. MONTERREY 74

1B. MONTERREY 75

1C. MEXICO 193

1D. NUEVO LAREDO 44

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Charles V. Barclay. Reason:
1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary. After the close of Mexico's bloodiest year on record (see MEXICO 193), drug related violence shows no signs of subsiding in 2009 and in fact has increased along Mexico's northern border with the U.S. Several high-profile incidents in recent weeks (including shootouts with Mexican authorities along the border, a family massacre in Tabasco, and recent anti-military demonstrations - suggest the cartels have decided to escalate violence against their rivals, and stand and fight rather than flee GOM security forces during counternarcotics operations. End Summary.

Overview

12. (SBU) According to CENAPI, approximately 710 organized crime related deaths have occurred within Mexico during the period January 1 through February 6. Leading the toll once again are the two border states Chihuahua (271) and Baja California (73) and Sinaloa state (55). Not included in this count are a spate of high-profile incidents over the last two weeks, including at least eight separate grenade attacks against police and other officials; one beheading; two mass executions; two separate high-casualty gun battles between Mexican authorities in towns near the U.S. border; three separate gun and grenade attacks aimed at journalists, which left one reporter killed; and the discovery of a mass grave containing the bodies of at least 16 apparent organized crime victims. Moreover, the country also saw anti-military demonstrations and riots in Monterrey (see reftel) and the border cities of Reynosa, Ciudad Juarez, and Nuevo Laredo.

Tabasco Massacre

13. (SBU) In Tabasco on February 14, at least 11 people were killed in Monte Largo. According to eyewitnesses, around 10 gunmen drove up to a house in which local police officer Carlos Reyes Lopez lived with his wife and three children. Lopez was a senior figure in the state attorney general's office, and had recently been involved in the arrest of a kidnapping gang. Eyewitnesses said that the gunmen, allegedly Zetas, killed everyone in the house and then attempted to kill surviving eyewitnesses in the vicinity. Local newspapers displayed pictures of the children's bodies shot under their beds.

Firefights Along the Border

¶4. (C) On February 10, 14 gunmen in a convoy of vehicles broke into multiple houses in Villa Ahumada, Chihuahua and kidnapped 9 municipal police officers before racing out of the city. In response, Mexican military deployed helicopters and airplanes and encountered the convoy on a dirt road between Villa Ahumada and Ciudad Juarez. A violent shootout ensued, resulting in the death of all 14 gunmen. One Mexican soldier was fatally shot and another wounded. Six of the kidnap victims had been executed prior to the engagement and the other three were seriously injured. The Commanding General for Operation Chihuahua said that the rescued municipal police officers advised them that the gunmen were members of the Sinaloa Cartel, run by Chapo Guzman. The entire Villa Ahumada municipal police force quit after the incident. Embassy intelligence sources have suggested that the municipal force is controlled the Juarez cartel) a rival of the Sinaloa Cartel and run by Vicente Carillo Fuentes.

¶6. (SBU) On February 17, another major firefight occurred in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, between suspected Zetas and Mexican soldiers and federal police, lasting approximately 3 hours. At least five and as many as 10 were killed. According to embassy sources, federal police were conducting an operation targeting Gregorio Saucedo Gamboa, a Gulf Cartel leader in Matamoros, when the fight broke out. As the confrontation escalated with the reported use of grenades and assault weapons, the military was called in for back up. Fighting

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eventually spilled out into the streets and took place over several hours. Ultimately, at least five criminals were killed and seven were detained. One of the dead was identified as Hector Saucedo Gamboa, aka "Karis," the drug plaza chief of Reynosa and brother of Gregorio.

¶7. (SBU) On the same day, Ciudad Juarez Municipal Police Director of Operations Sacramento Perez Serrano, was ambushed and killed along with three of his bodyguards in Ciudad Juarez, just a block from the U.S. Consulate. On the evening of the assassination, several "narcomantas" were placed throughout the city warning the police chief to resign or they would kill a police officer every 48 hours.

Demonstrations

¶8. (C) Separately, anti-military protests that began last week in Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo (reflets) spread to the border on February 17, shutting down traffic at several international bridges for several hours in Reynosa, Ciudad Juarez, and Nuevo Laredo. There were also protests in the Gulf state of Veracruz, where roads were blocked. The demonstrations, most of which were small, were against alleged abuse of civilians by troops combating drug gangs, but press reports and local politicians claim that the protests were orchestrated by the Zetas. Some reports indicate that the demonstrators were paid and many of them were unaware who was supplying the funds. (Reftels) The Zetas gang, which has largely taken over the Gulf cartel for which it originally worked, dominates in each of the states that had anti-army demonstrations. Consulate Ciudad Juarez reports that the border delay only lasted about 1-2 hours and that the demonstrators used taxis to block vehicle traffic) not cargo or pedestrian traffic. Collaborative reporting indicates that the demonstrations in Ciudad Juarez were also likely orchestrated by the cartels.

Comment

¶9. (C) Some of the recent mayhem is simply more of the same disturbing trend noted in the closing months of 2008. Much of it, however, stems from the more aggressive posture the Mexican military has adopted in the north, as well as the

pushback it has elicited from the cartels. The Mexican military had recently shifted its approach in northern Mexico from mounting specific highway checkpoints to establishing a greater presence in urban areas and cities. A robust presence in the city of Chihuahua allowed the military to deploy rapidly to Villa Ahumada in response to the police kidnappings there on February 10. More aggressive patrolling elsewhere is putting army units and other federal forces in direct conflict with cartel musclemen on their own highly prized turf. Rather than fade away, gunmen are more frequently mounting ferocious counter-attacks. The spate of multi-casualty fire-fights and shootings, combined with the noisy, disruptive demonstrations apparently organized by narco-traffickers, has made life even more difficult for residents of the border community.

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